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The Civilian Front: Learning from Success

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For the third time in six and a half years, the civilian front in Israel found itself under large-scale attack. The numbers speak for themselves. During the Second Lebanon War, in July 2006, Hezbollah launched almost 4,000 rockets at northern Israel during 33 days of fighting, for a daily average of some 120 launches, with fewer than one-quarter of them reaching populated areas. During Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009, according to its own reports, Hamas launched 558 rockets at southern Israel, for a daily average of about 23, with more than 70 percent falling in open spaces. During the eight days of the recent operation, Hamas launched more than 1,400 rockets at Israel, for a daily average of about 175, with rockets targeting Tel Aviv and Jerusalem for the first time. This operation also marked the first occasion that the Iron Dome active air defense system was put into use. According to an IDF statement, the system's success rate against effective rockets was 84 percent. These numbers clearly indicate an increasing trend of threats against the civilian population on each of the principal fronts. This essay aims to assess the development of the Israeli response to the growing challenge on the military and civilian levels.

On the purely military level, the operation reflected the positive effect of the combination of the IDF's offensive and defensive capabilities. In fact, this was the first major operation in which the active defense system that has been under accelerated development, production, and deployment in recent years was manifested in a concrete and successful way. It is clear and encouraging evidence of a shift in strategy in Israel's defense doctrine, giving the defensive dimension an important role in the conduct of the campaign. Along with due respect to the Iron Dome system and its developers and operators, it is important to point out that the offensive arm

of the air force made a distinct contribution to the operation. At the initial stages of the campaign, the air force inflicted heavy damage on Hamas's (relatively) long-range offensive capabilities, which can reach the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem areas. Later the air force was able to continuously suppress most of the enemy's launch capabilities. It thus suggests that under current circumstances, at least on the Gaza Strip front, the combination of Israel's defensive and offensive aerial power, the capacities of its intelligence agencies, and to a certain extent the deterring presence of large ground forces was able to provide a reasonable military response to the Hamas threat and achieve most of the operation's goals.

This success does not limit the importance of learning lessons for the future, including in the context of the active defense system. It is important to remember that the current operation was limited in scope and duration. The principal assumption must be that the arsenal of the enemy on the southern and northern fronts will continue to grow, especially in terms of rockets, both quantitatively and qualitatively (which might be significant mostly in the realm of precision). This will present Israel with a growing, more complex challenge. Therefore, to prepare for a full-scale military confrontation, including a two-front scenario, Israel must now examine several key areas on the basis of the positive lessons of Pillar of Defense. First, Israel must increase the number of Iron Dome installations to at least 13-15 batteries, in order to adequately defend military targets, the civilian population, and critical national infrastructure facilities. The contribution of American financial aid is important, but it will probably be necessary to increase the order of battle beyond the six additional batteries decided upon by the Israeli government during the operation. Second, Israel must improve the capabilities of the current systems and increase their effectiveness and interception rate. A first step in this direction was already taken during the operation with the deployment of an improved system to protect Tel Aviv, whose most critical component was the radar associated with the Magic Wand (David's Sling) system. Third, it is necessary to accelerate the development of the Magic Wand interceptor system for medium-range (70-250 km) rockets, so that it is operational before 2015. The successful test carried out immediately after the operation is a positive sign, with an important deterrent message to Hezbollah. Fourth, it is necessary to provide an adequate response to the need for reasonable defense against short-range (less than 4 km) rockets, which represent a gap in Israel's

defenses, particularly because of the use of lightweight mortars and short-range improvised rockets used against civilian localities in the immediate vicinity of the Gaza Strip. Now, after the public debate about the critical need for active defense is concluded, it is necessary to engage in accelerated construction of the operational force in accordance with the forecasts of the enemy's increasing quantitative and qualitative buildup.

Despite Iron Dome's successes, the last operation made it clear that we need also strengthen our passive defenses. The dozens of rockets that managed to penetrate the active defense system are indicative of its limitations, especially in future conditions entailing more dense and massive bombardments. It will be necessary to take into account that the northern front alone could possibly experience barrages of more than 600 rockets daily during a protracted confrontation. The recent events thus cast doubt on the validity of the categorical statement attributed to former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert that "we're not going to shelter ourselves to death." It would be more adequate to suggest that we should meticulously explore the expansion of passive defense, while taking into account priorities and budgetary constraints. In this context, it is necessary to increase the numbers and prevalence of the family shelters, both as a life saver and as a means – alongside public bomb shelters – to allow for an emergency routine under fire. The importance of this for the morale of the public was strikingly evident during Operation Pillar of Defense. Hence, we now need to renew the national effort to augment the residential shelters, which currently exist in only 30 percent of the apartments. Considering that the present legal framework (based on Plan 38) is not producing sufficient yields, it is necessary to draft a new plan to enhance its attractiveness and encourage large-scale implementation in crowded urban centers. Also, we will have to expand investments to provide physical protection for critical military and civilian installations. The lack of such sufficient protection is a flaw that might prove critical, given the foreseeable threat of more accurate rockets and missiles. The early warning system is another crucial area that must be addressed by advancing the implementation of the existing plan for expanding the number of warning zones and by completing the system of mobile device warnings via private text messages.

Considering the localized nature of the last operation, one can point with satisfaction to an acceptable level of success in terms of the civilian defense. One of the important elements was the positive functioning of the

Home Front Command and especially the dissemination of information to civilians, which was effective, clear, and properly measured, and made effective use of the updated means of mass distribution. Furthermore, the government ministries and the local authorities worked rather well, and in tandem with the rescue services – police, firefighters, and Magen David Adom – hence creating a professional network allowing for appropriate conduct. Implementation of the “Special Situation on the Home Front” (a legal mechanism for issuing binding regulations) immediately upon the commencement of hostilities helped regulate the few economic and market-related issues that arose during the campaign. The conduct of the public was also proper and disciplined for the most part, especially after the grave risk of not following Home Front Command instructions was demonstrated by the deaths of three civilians in Kiryat Malachi. Although the evacuation of civilians from the areas worst hit by rockets was extensive, it was also conducted appropriately and did not place an undue burden on the social services, which all in all functioned professionally well. As always, there were people with special needs who required personal attention, but the relatively limited pressure enabled the relevant systems to function satisfactorily.

The successful combination of the various networks resulted in a reasonable overall response to the short, limited challenges during the eight days of Pillar of Defense. In many ways, this was a multidimensional – and critical – exercise for the entire system in advance of future possible challenges. Assuming that Hamas’s high-trajectory weapons arsenals are restocked and even enhanced and Hezbollah’s arsenals continue to improve quantitatively and qualitatively – in terms of range, warheads, variety, concealment, and especially accuracy – Israel will require much greater and more plentiful military and civilian capabilities of the sort demonstrated in Pillar of Defense. Hence the importance of ongoing investments and preparedness, based on realistic priorities and carefully considered prioritization in the following key areas: greater military capability with emphasis on defense; improved cooperation among the various agencies in the military-civilian sphere and within the civilian realm; construction of a comprehensive, flexible civilian system of command and control; and especially the construction of a prudently designed systemic organizational structure capable of systematically coordinating responsibility and authority for the home front.

Operation Pillar of Defense demonstrated again the centrality and criticality of the civilian front alongside the military one in Israel's security envelope. One must take into account the possibility that future tests will be more difficult, more prolonged, and more dangerous than this last one, especially if they involve two fronts. To produce civilian capabilities that ensure functional continuity of the economy and infrastructures, alongside the necessary societal resilience under wartime conditions, it is necessary to formulate a multi-system, long-term national plan and implement it in stages. Many of the important elements for formulating such a national plan already exist and are operating successfully on the ground. In some of them, such as the formulation and implementation of projects for enhancing community resilience, which have been developed here since the 1980s, Israel has emerged as a world leader. What is still missing and worth addressing is the national formulation of an integrative defense doctrine for the civilian front, at the national and local levels, that will serve as the basis of a multi-year, budgeted working plan for the home front. Such a national plan would have clearly defined goals for the preparedness of all the systems before the next large-scale confrontation, which can reasonably be expected to occur and whose nature is already mostly known. Unfortunately, our experience in this line is not very promising. Israel is capable of brilliant improvisation. It is less successful when it tries to produce an integrated, holistic national plan based on multidisciplinary, multi-organizational collaboration. But the achievements of the recent past and the relative success of Operation Pillar of Defense indicate that if we maximize our existing conceptual, technological, military, and civilian potential, then we can overcome the political and bureaucratic obstacles and create an appropriate response to the threats that the civilian front is almost sure to face in the future.

